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SECRET SPOKE

August 9, 1974

ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT MILITARY SITUATION IN VIETNAM

KEY POINTS

-- The Communists have increased the level of their military action in South Vietnam and are likely to increase it further in the near future.

-- We do not believe, however, that a coordinated, countrywide offensive similar to that of 1972 is in the offing for the remainder of 1974.

-- But whatever Hanoi's present plans, it must be recognized that developments throughout South Vietnam over the past few months have placed South Vietnam in a more vulnerable position.

-- If the North Vietnamese perceive that the battlefield situation is turning in their favor and/or that the US is no longer willing to come to Saigon's defense, they might be tempted to undertake even heavier action and take greater risks to make major gains in South Vietnam. It would take several weeks from time of decision for the North Vietnamese to prepare for a large-scale offensive, and we would obtain advance indications of their preparations during this period.

Approved For Release 2006/10/13 : CIA-RDP79R01099A001500030001-8

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THE DETAILS

1. Over the past month there has been a fairly high level of Communist military activity in South Vietnam, particularly in the northernmost military region (MR 1). More recently, there have been several indicators pointing toward increased action. The most important of these are:

a. On August 6, [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] ri 25X1
25X1 [redacted] antiaircraft units to prevent "enemy" aircraft from entering the area so that artillery units could support infantry operations. Reference was made to an "open fire time for action" (not further defined) being "K-hour, D-day plus two."

b. The NVA 304th Division may be deploying from MR 1's Quang Tri Province to the Quang Nam battlefield. For his part, the South Vietnamese MR 1 commander is calling back the 1st Airborne Brigade from Saigon to MR 1 and has directed that the 3rd Airborne Brigade move from Hue to the Da Nang area.

c. In the MR 2 highlands, the major Communist tactical command authority -- the B-3 Front (see map) -- has moved from the South Vietnamese-Laotian-Cambodian border area to a position between the cities of Kontum and Pleiku. The headquarters of the two major NVA logistic units in the area have also moved eastward from the border area in recent weeks. Moves of this nature usually have indicated major increases in fighting.

d. In MR 3 north and northwest of Saigon, another major Communist military headquarters has expanded communications with its subordinate regiments, suggesting that these units may increase military activity in the near future.

2. There are other developments over the past nine months which could relate to a decision by Hanoi to step-up its military activity at some point. For example:

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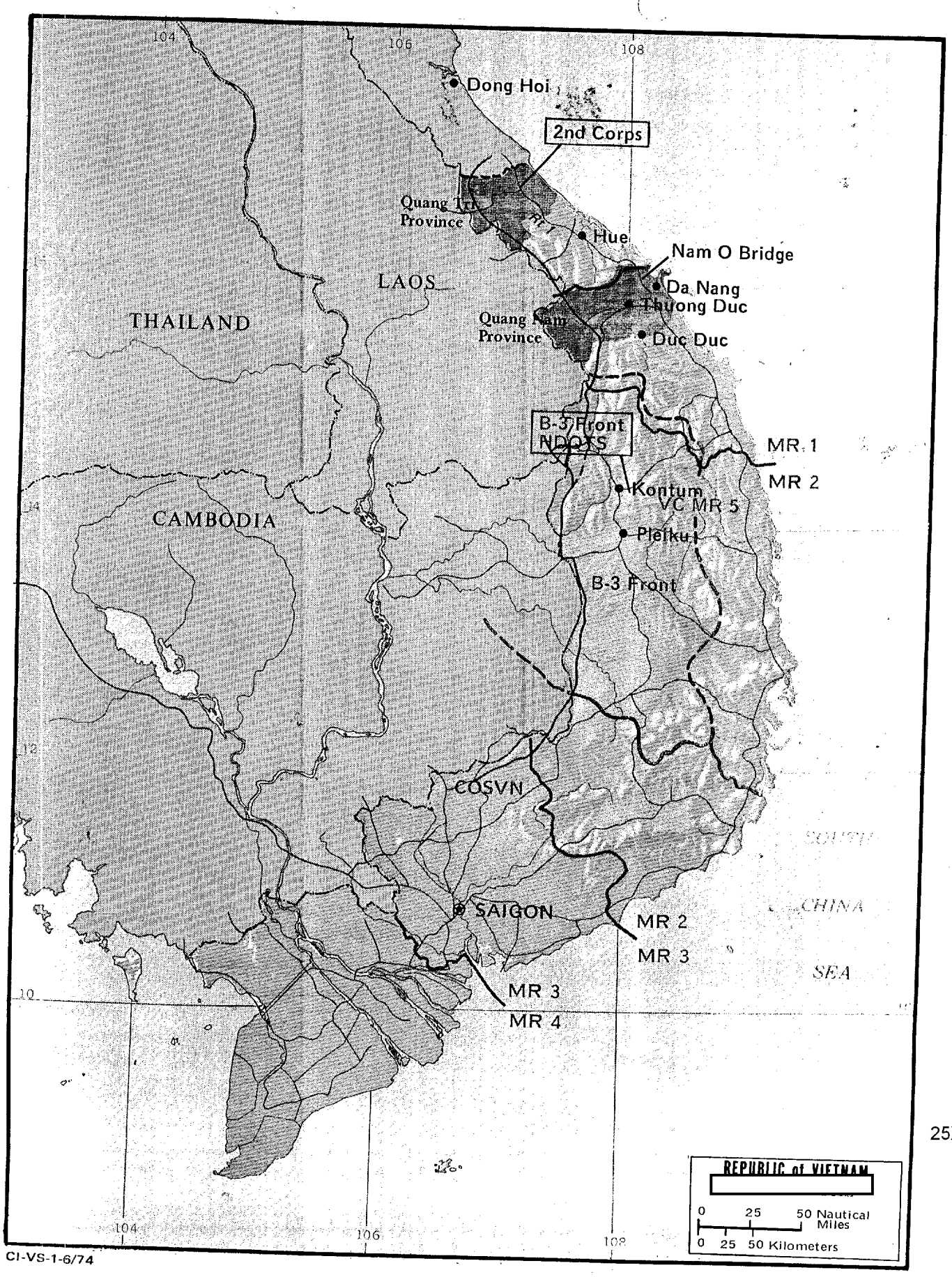

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a. Two NVA corps headquarters have been formed as major tactical components of the NVA. The 1st Corps Headquarters, located in central North Vietnam, controls three strategic reserve divisions and major artillery, armor, and engineer elements. The 2nd Corps Headquarters, identified in early June 1974, controls Communist main force units in South Vietnam's two northern provinces. These tactical headquarters could facilitate the deployment of NVA divisions to reinforce current Communist military operations in MR 1 as well as to control a large force structure in any future major offensive.

b. Twenty-two MIGs are currently deployed at two bases in the North Vietnamese panhandle, and additional deployments are possible. [redacted] 25X1 the southernmost airfield at Dong Hoi, only 30 miles north of the DMZ, may soon be used by MIGs. MIGs have carried out almost daily flights over southern North Vietnam, and [redacted] MIGs will 25X1 become more active in this area. Several radar complexes in the panhandle provide ground control intercept coverage of about 100 miles into South Vietnam.

c. The Communists have moved supplies into South Vietnam at an unprecedented rate. This push has continued and may actually have increased during the past several months. For example, during May, June, and early July, heavy ordnance shipments were noted moving to Viet Cong (VC) MR 5 on South Vietnam central coast. In addition, in early July, [redacted] a transportation 25X1 campaign was undertaken to move large quantities of supplies in 30 days to all areas of South Vietnam.

3. After thorough examination, we believe that these indicators are insufficient to conclude that the Communists have made a decision to launch a major offensive on the scale of their April 1972 effort. Several other indicators that would, in our judgment, be involved -- and which we believe would likely be detected -- are lacking. These would be:

Approved For Release 2006/10/13 : CIA-RDP79R01099A001500030001-8

Approved For Release 2006/10/13 : CIA-RDP79R01099A001500030001-8

-- A new surge of heavy personnel infiltration from North Vietnam.

-- Movement of NVA divisions in North Vietnam.

-- Communist directives and propaganda suggesting a step-up in military activity of the scope and magnitude that could be regarded as a 1972-style major countryside offensive.

Moreover, first hand observers of the military situation in MR 1 report that, despite initial Communist successes, the South Vietmese performance thus far has been good.

4. We believe, however, that the type of fighting we have seen recently in MR 1 will increase and spread to other areas of the country. The upsurge in MR 1 began in mid-July when NVA/VC forces seized several outposts in the Duc Duc area of Quang Nam Province. Since then, Duc Duc District Town has been under heavy pressure and nearby Thuong Duc District Town was captured by the Communists. Casualties have been heavy on both sides. NVA units have not been able, however, to make significant moves into the coastal lowlands. Although the South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) can control the situation in Quang Nam Province, the increased NVA activity has forced the South Vietnamese to weaken their position in other areas of MR 1 and to deploy their reserve brigade from the Saigon area.

5. The available evidence indicates that the Communists in the next few months will be placing greater reliance on military action to:

a. Counter Government of Vietnam (GVN) pacification and military operations in contested or Communist-controlled areas, particularly in the vicinity of lines of communication;

b. Reoccupy areas lost to RVNAF since the ceasefire;

c. Expand the amount of territory and population under Communist control;

d. Neutralize the GVN economic blockade;

e. Weaken GVN administrative control;

f. Test, attrite, and demoralize the RVNAF.

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6. A recent COSVN assessment of the Communist dry season offensive from April to July 1974 states that: (1) the GVN has suffered severe setbacks; (2) the military balance is shifting in the Communists' favor; (3) military operations are necessary through the summer and fall; and (4) such activity could lead to striking "a decisive blow in the 1975 dry season." The same assessment admitted Communist weaknesses in both city and district-level political structures and held that little could be gained at the bargaining table. It is not clear how much of this assessment is propaganda or exhortation.

Conclusion

7. The Communists have been rebuilding their military forces in both North and South Vietnam since the Vietnam settlement agreement of January 1973. They clearly are preparing to return to large-scale warfare at some point in the future as we stated in out last National Intelligence Estimate on Vietnam. (See NIE 53/14.3-74: The Likelihood of a Major North Vietnamese Offensive Against South Vietnam Before June 30, 1975, published May 23, 1974.) They now have the capability of launching a major or all-out offensive on relatively short notice -- i.e., several weeks or so. We do not believe, however, that the current evidence portends an overall strategy change, and we do not expect the North Vietnamese to attempt an all-out countrywide offensive through the end of the year.

8. Whatever Hanoi's present plans, it must be recognized that developments throughout South Vietnam over the past few months have placed South Vietnam in a more vulnerable position. If the North Vietnamese perceived that the battlefield situation had turned in their favor and/or that the US was no longer willing to come to Saigon's defense because of domestic political constraints, they might be tempted to undertake heavier military actions and take greater risks to make major gains in South Vietnam.

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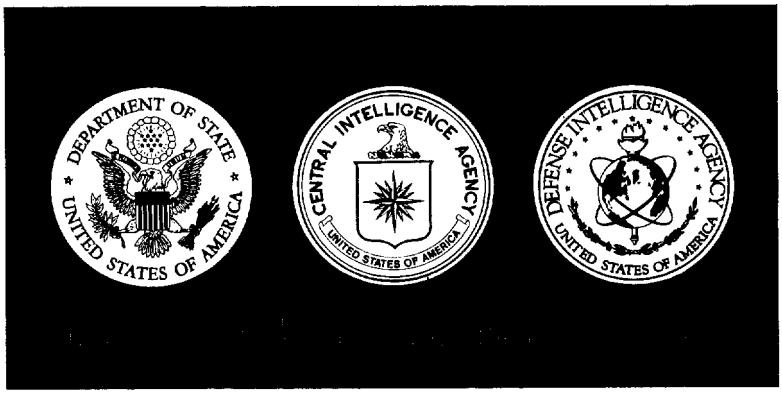

Assessment of the Current Military Situation in Vietnam

(This Memorandum was drafted by the Defense Intelligence Agency and fully coordinated with the Central Intelligence Agency and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the Department of State.)

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NSA, DIA reviews completed

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9 August 1974

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